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SUBJECT: A STOIC PARK GEUN-HYE DISCUSSES GNP PARTY
POLITICS, NORTH KOREA POLICY

REF: SEOUL 000530

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a March 18 lunch meeting with the Ambassador, Park Geun-hye discussed Grand National Party (GNP) party politics and policy toward North Korea. Though she seemed relaxed, Park confessed to being disturbed by the party's nominations process (reftel) and said the decision to cut many veteran lawmakers and Park supporters put her in a difficult position, with many of her loyalists planning to run as independents. Nevertheless, Park studiously avoided saying anything negative about her political rival, President Lee Myung-bak, instead referring generally to powerful figures in the party. Park also opined that the problem with South Korean policy toward the North over the last decade is that it has been too unilateral. She emphasized the need to coordinate with the international community even on issues like humanitarian assistance. END SUMMARY.

PARTY POLITICS

¶2. (C) In her March 18 lunch with the Ambassador, former GNP chair Park Geun-hye was characteristically diplomatic in talking about her concerns about the GNP nomination process. Park said that it seemed that most of the ousted incumbent lawmakers will run as independents and, if they win, probably rejoin the GNP after the elections. She acknowledged the danger that these (in many cases, powerful) incumbents could split the conservative vote, but she said that she is in no position to advise them one way or the other. The people, Park said, would have to decide for themselves who was best able to represent them.

¶3. (C) Park conceded the Ambassador's point that United Democratic Party (UDP) chairman Sohn Hak-kyu had led the party successfully in recent months. In discussing Sohn, a former GNP lawmaker, she cited an old Chinese proverb that says that if you know the enemy, you will win every battle against him. She said that the UDP had benefited from the GNP's missteps during the transition period and in its selection of cabinet ministers.

¶4. (C) Park was circumspect in describing her own prospects within the party. She did not deny interest in again assuming the post of party chair, but said that she had heard

that Lee Jae-oh was positioning himself to take over; she would therefore have to wait and see how things played out. She said the GNP's nomination process undid the work she had done as party leader to instill fairness into the system. The nominee selection should be based on candidates' service to their constituents, not their alliances with powerful party members. Park thought sexism had played a role in her loss in the GNP primary elections last year. With the recent failings of the Lee Myung-bak Administration, however, she believed that some of that sentiment within the party had dissipated.

NORTH KOREA POLICY

15. (C) Park said that South Korea should not approach humanitarian aid as an inter-Korean issue. Rather it is now an international issue and Seoul needs to coordinate its aid with the other Six-Party Talks countries. Until now, the ROKG approach in dealing with Pyongyang has been too unilateral. The key, Park said, is to increase leverage with the North. She recalled the German experience and said that West Germany had never given aid to East Germany without some sort of conditions, such as improving the human rights situation. From Park's perspective, the ultimate goals of the Six-Party Talks should be threefold: nuclear dismantlement, establishing peace on the peninsula, and ensuring that North Koreans are better off. Policies should try to move North Korea toward integration with the international community.

16. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the Korean people's tolerance for taking a tougher line on the

North, Park said that the ROKG needs to build consensus for a tougher policy. Although North and South Korea should not sever ties, relations should be conducted on a step-by-step basis.

COMMENT

17. (C) These are trying times for Park Geun-hye. A clear front-runner to succeed Lee Myung-bak as president, Park must walk a fine line between supporting President Lee and remaining loyal to her faction members, many of whom were denied nomination for the National Assembly elections. She does this by keeping silent. Her regal attitude, however, makes it very clear that she is not pleased with the new president. We expect the chill -- a virtual cold war -- between Lee and Park will be a defining element in Korean politics for the next several years. END COMMENT
VERSHBOW